

The Intersection of Poverty **and Sexual Violence**

Michigan Domestic Violence Prevention and Treatment Board
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There is a clear and substantial body of research indicating the fragile relationship between poverty and sexual assault. Simply said, those living in poverty are at higher risk for sexual assault and conversely, sexual assault survivors are at a higher risk for struggling in poverty. The nuances between these two social justice issues are well-blended, requiring Michigan to examine the way in which we reach out to and assist our most impoverished citizens as well as our response to and advocacy for sexual assault survivors living in poverty. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the connection between poverty and sexual assault as well as to illuminate the tremendous need for resources to meaningfully serve these intersecting populations.

Sexual Violence

Sexual violence is forcing or coercing an individual to engage in any non-consensual sexual contact or sexual penetration. Rape and other sexually-based crimes are among the most frequently committed offenses, yet because many victims feel unable or too frightened to report their assault, it remains one of the most under-reported person to person crimes in our nation. Given this reality, although this paper provides staggering statistics regarding sexual assault, it must be assumed that the true picture of the impact of sexual assault is significantly more expansive and devastating than even the most current studies suggest.

Sexual violence does not occur in a vacuum. To the contrary, it is perpetrated within a context of classism, sexism, racism, ableism, heterosexism, and ageism. The overall culture in which we live perpetuates a system of attitudes, beliefs, messages, inequities and acts that support sexual violence. In order to address one of these forms of oppression in ways that offer concrete assistance to those subjected to its effects, practitioners must be prepared to address the affliction of multiple oppressions.

What follows is a statistical picture of the nation's struggle against sexual violence:

- One study estimates that, in one 12 month period, 302,091 adult American women and 92,748 adult American men experience a completed or attempted rape. Because some persons suffer multiple rapes, it is estimated that 876,064 rapes of adult American women and 111,298 rapes of adult American men occur annually.¹
- One in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys will be sexually assaulted by age 18.²

¹ Tjaden, Patricia and Nancy Thoennes. "Prevalence, Incidence and Consequences of Violence Against Women: Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey." National Institute of Justice, U.S. Department of Justice, November 1998.

² Finkelhor, David, et al. "Sexual Abuse in a National Survey of Adult Men and Women: Prevalence, Characteristics, and Risk Factors." 1990.

- In Michigan, using a restrictive definition of sexual assault that excludes contact assault, some categories of penetration, and same sex assaults, there were 5,347 victims reporting rape in 2006.³
- On average, from 1992-2000, only 31% of all rapes and sexual victimizations were reported to the police.⁴
- Seven in 10 rape and sexual assault victims know their attacker prior to the assault.⁵
- Of female Americans who are raped, 54% experience their first rape before age 18.⁶
- Women with a childhood history of sexual abuse are 4.7 times more likely to be subsequently raped.⁷
- Chances that a woman will develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after being raped are between 50% and 95%.⁸

Consistent with the national picture, sexual assault remains one of the most underreported crimes in Michigan. Nevertheless, the most recent information from the 2006 Michigan Crime Report (MICR) indicates that 15,212 sex offenses were reported to law enforcement, with 7,317 involving penetration. The Michigan Domestic Violence Prevention and Treatment Board (MDVPTB) funds 26 sexual assault service provider agencies. Unduplicated data for fiscal year 2006-07 indicates 9,857 hotline calls, 6,131 survivors accessing services, 1,155 completed sexual assault nurse examiner forensic evidence collection exams, 2,969 face-to-face emergency contacts and 139 sexual assault survivors provided shelter.

Poverty

The 2006 American Community Survey of the U.S. Census Bureau indicates that 13.3% of Americans live in poverty. Women and children represent a significant portion of this population. In Michigan, more than one million people are in a terrible struggle with poverty. Also according to the 2006 American Community Survey of the United States Census, 13.5% of all people were living below the poverty level in Michigan. A staggering 46.2% of families with a female householder, no husband present and with related children under 5 years old were living below the poverty level.

People besieged by poverty are often disregarded and socially punished by mainstream society for the very nature of their struggles and their circumstances are often compounded by other forms of oppression as well as isolation from financial and emotional assistance. In order to facilitate help for this population in Michigan, we must consider the individual as a complex

³ Michigan Uniform Crime Report (2006).

⁴ Hart, Timothy and Rennison, Callie. "Reporting Crime to the Police, 1992-2000." Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, March 2003.

⁵ Rennison, Callie M. "Criminal Victimization 1999: Changes 1998-00 with Trends 1993-99." Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, August 2000.

⁶ Tjaden, Patricia and Nancy Thoennes. "Prevalence, Incidence and Consequences of Violence Against Women: Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey." National Institute of Justice, U.S. Department of Justice, November 1998.

⁷ Fisher, Bonnie S., Francis T. Cullen, and Michael G. Turner. "The Sexual Victimization of College Women." Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, 2000.

⁸ Population Information Program. "Population Reports: Ending Violence Against Women." The Johns Hopkins University School of Public Health, December 1999.

person with her/his own history and work from this point to foster the growth s/he feels would help improve her/his circumstances.

The Link between Poverty and Sexual Violence

Research shows an undeniable, complex and often cyclical connection between sexual violence and poverty. Sexual violence can jeopardize a person's economic wellbeing, often leading to homelessness, unemployment, interrupted education and health, mental health, and other daily stressors and struggles.⁹ In turn, poverty increases the risk of sexual violence; it can make women and children more dependent on others for survival and, therefore, less able to control their sexual safety, to consent to sex, and to meaningfully address their own victimization.¹⁰ Indeed, persons with household incomes under \$7,500 are twice as likely as the general population to be sexually assaulted.¹¹

Sexual violence increases the risk of poverty by undermining employment and interrupting education. In the aftermath of sexual violence, many victims struggle on the job due to trauma, persistent fear, physical complications, health concerns, court dates, depression and anxiety. One alarming study found that 50% of sexual assault victims lost their job or were forced to quit in the aftermath of sexual assault.¹² Loss of a job can compound the challenges of the healing process and increase the risk of sustained poverty. Similarly, sexual violence can undermine a person's pursuit of education, decreasing their earning potential and economic stability throughout the course of their lives. This risk cannot be underestimated. Research has shown that in one year, over 4,000 incidents of rape occurred in public schools across the country.¹³ The risk of poverty and unemployment can be exacerbated by alcohol and drug use. There is considerable evidence that without intervention, victims of sexual violence may self-medicate with alcohol and drugs to cope with the aftermath of sexual assault.¹⁴ For women, drug use in particular is correlated with economic deprivation, homelessness, loss of child custody, and long term health and mental health risk.¹⁵

⁹ Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape (2007), Poverty and Sexual Violence: Building Prevention and Intervention Responses, 1.

¹⁰ The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2007), Sexual Violence: Overview.

¹¹ Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Crime Victimization Survey (1995).

¹² Ellis, Atkeson & Calhoun (1993), An assessment of the long term reaction to rape, *Abnormal Psychology*, 90, 263-264.

¹³ U.S. Department of Education (1997), Violence and discipline problems in U.S. public schools.

¹⁴ Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs (2005), Sexual assault and substance abuse, *Research and Advocacy Digest*, 7(1); Bloom (2002), The PVS disaster: Poverty, violence and substance abuse in lives of women and children, Philadelphia, PA: Women's law project, (finding that 33% to 50% of women who abuse substances were sexually abused as children and finding that 73% of women in a residential substance abuse treatment programs report that they were raped; 45% were raped multiple times)

¹⁵ Browne et al (2004), Secondary data analysis on the etiology, course, and consequences of intimate partner violence against extremely poor.

Moreover, marginalized housing and homelessness can both result from, and increase the risk of, sexual violence. Victims who are dependent on the perpetrator for basic needs, including the roof over their heads, are frequently forced to choose between losing shelter and continuing to live with the perpetrator.^{16,17} In one study, an astonishing 71 % of victims indicated that they wanted to move after a sexual assault but had no place to go or could not afford to relocate.¹⁸ Another study found that 61% of homeless girls and 16% of homeless boys reported sexual abuse as the reason for leaving home.¹⁹ Finally, the number of incidents of sexual assault among the homeless is heartbreaking. Research has shown that 13% of homeless women reported having been raped in the previous 12 months, and one-half of these women were raped at least twice.²⁰

In addition to undermining employment and safe housing, sexual violence can be a direct and indirect cause of teen pregnancy and the economic vulnerability that results from it. A number of studies have linked sexual abuse and rape to the risk of pregnancy during adolescence, finding in some cases that as many as 60% of pregnant and parenting teens had experienced contact molestation, attempted rape, or rape prior to their first pregnancy.²¹ Adolescents who are victimized prior to their first pregnancy are more likely to have voluntary intercourse earlier, have sex partners who are older, have second or third pregnancies, and experience repeated victimization.²² In addition, the likelihood that these adolescents will engage in high risk behaviors, such as alcohol and drug use, prostitution, and sex trading is significantly increased.²³ Research has found anywhere between 5% and 26% of adolescent girls are pregnant as a direct result of rape.²⁴

Finally, the out-of pocket expenses associated with sexual assault are considerable. The out-of-pocket costs, such as medical and mental health care expenses and missed time at work, are estimated at \$5,100 per victim.²⁵ Out-of-pocket expenses in addition to non monetary losses, such as fear, pain, suffering, and loss of quality of life, are estimated to total \$87,000. For those living in poverty, the costs can be devastating and for those living on the edge of poverty, these costs can push them over the line.

¹⁶ Goodman, Fels & Glen (2006), No safe place: Sexual assault in the lives of homeless women.

¹⁷ Estate & Weiner (2001), *Commercial sexual exploitation of children*, Philadelphia PA: University of Pennsylvania.

¹⁸ Keely (2006), Landlord sexual assault and rape of tenants: Survey findings and advocacy approaches, *Clearinghouse REVIEW Journal of Poverty Law and Policy*, November-December 2006.

¹⁹ Estate & Weiner (2001), *Commercial sexual exploitation of children*, Philadelphia PA: University of Pennsylvania.

²⁰ Goodman, Fels & Glen (2006), No safe place: Sexual assault in the lives of homeless women.

²¹ Boyer & Fine (1993), Sexual abuse as a factor in adolescent pregnancy and child maltreatment, *Family Planning Perspectives*, Vol. 24(2) (finding 62% of pregnant and parenting teens had experienced contact molestation, attempted rape, or rape prior to their first pregnancy); Gershenson, et. al. (1989), The prevalence of coercive sexual experience among teenage mothers, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, Vol. 4(2), 1989 (finding that 61% of pregnant teenagers had an unwanted sexual experience).

²² Stermac et al. (2002), *Childhood risk factors for Women's Sexual Victimization*, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, Vol 17(6); Boyer & Fine (1993), Sexual abuse as a factor in adolescent pregnancy and child maltreatment, *Family Planning Perspectives*, Vol. 24(2).

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ McFarlan et al. (2005), Intimate partner sexual assault against women: Frequency, health consequences, and treatment outcomes, *Obstetrics and Gynecology*, 105 (finding 26% of raped women experience a rape induced pregnancy); Boyer & Fine (1993), Sexual abuse as a factor in adolescent pregnancy and child maltreatment, *Family Planning Perspectives*, Vol. 24(2) (finding between 11-20% of girls were pregnant as a result of rape); Holmes, et al. (1996), Rape Related Pregnancy: estimates and descriptive characteristics from a national sample of women, *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology* (finding a national rape related pregnancy rate of 5% with the disproportionate number of pregnancy rapes among adolescents).

²⁵ Miller, et al. (1996), Victim costs and consequences: A new look U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Nation Institute of Justice. NCJ 155282.